

THE SONG OF *NINOX SCUTULATA OBSCURA*

(With one text-figure)

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There has been some controversy over the relationship of the two species of *Ninox* owls occurring in the Andaman Islands. Sonograms of the calls of positively identified individuals clarify these relationships.

As *Ninox scutulata obscura* Hume 1873 of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is almost entirely dark in colour, there has been some uncertainty about its relationship with mainland *Ninox scutulata*. Further complicating the picture is the presence of *Ninox affinis* Beavan 1867 on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Superficially, *N. affinis* resembles mainland *N. scutulata* much more than *obscura* does.

Ali and Ripley (1981) do not mention the song of *obscura* in their account of that form. However, in their account of *N. affinis*, A.L. Butler is quoted as saying that the call of *affinis* is “a loud crow, something like a *Glaucidium*’s note

and quite different from that of *N. scutulata* in Ceylon (=Sri Lanka), which is a fluted disyllable, as is also that of *obscura*,” thus offering an accurate description of the calls of both species. Abdulali (1964) also correctly noted the song of *obscura* as a “loud disyllabic *coo-ook*.”

In March 1991, I had the opportunity to visit North Andaman Island and was able to tape record both *N. scutulata obscura* and *N. affinis*. Sonograms of both are presented in Fig. 1. The left diagrams show frequency plotted with time, showing the upward inflected double note of *N. scutulata* and the downward inflected single note of *affinis*. The right side of the figure is a

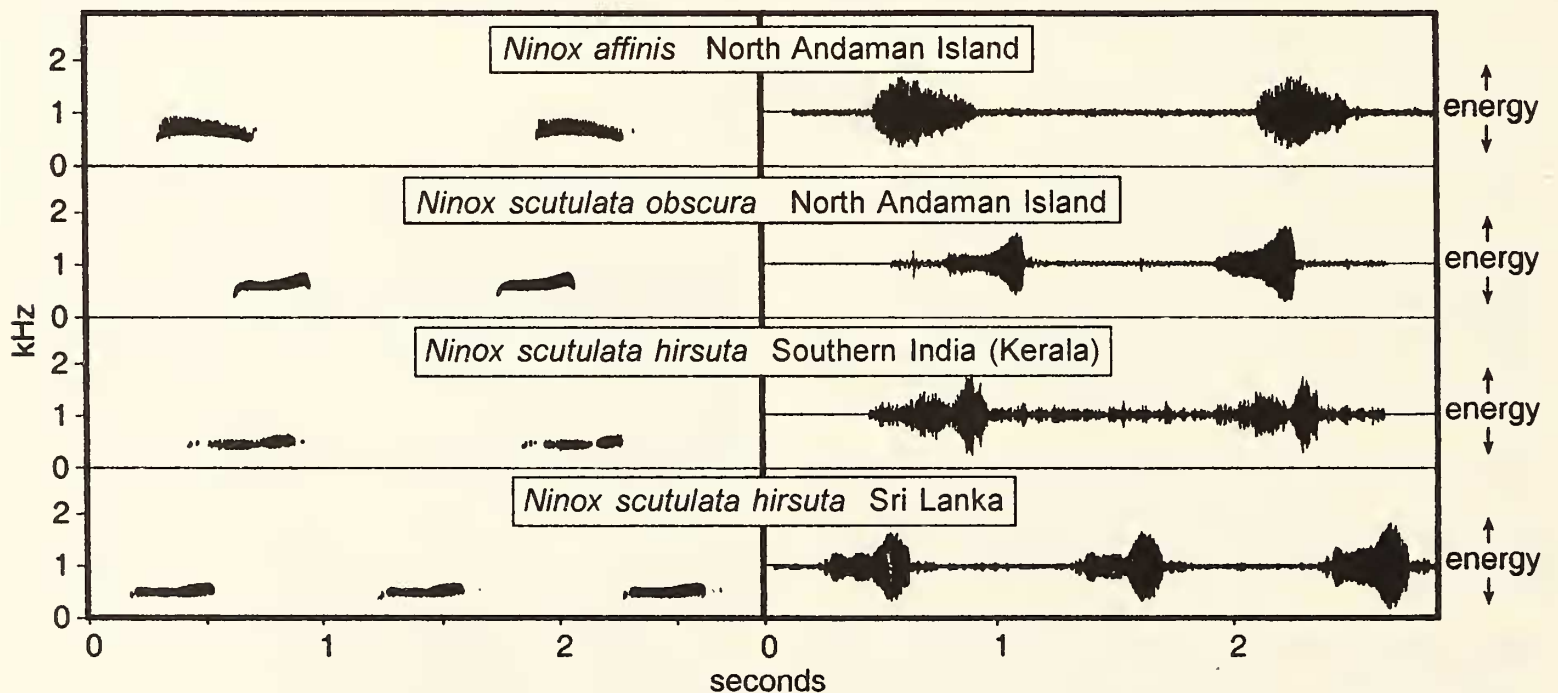


Fig. 1: Song of *Ninox scutulata obscura* of the Andamans compared with songs of *N.s. hirsuta* from Kerala and Sri Lanka, and with the song of *N. affinis* from the Andamans

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SONG OF NINOX SCUTULATA OBSCURA

wave form sonogram showing the amplitude of sound energy emanating from a central axis. The double note of *scutulata* is distinct in *hirsuta* from Kerala and Sri Lanka, but less so in *obscura* in the Andamans. The single note of *affinis* is clearly shown here.

I was able to observe both species at close range in a powerful flashlight beam, wherein the all-dark underparts of *obscura* and the streaked underparts of *affinis* were conspicuous.

The song of *obscura* is a mellow hollow double note *whoo-wup* with a rising inflection and accent on the second note and is similar to that of *Ninox scutulata hirsuta* of southern India and Sri Lanka. It differs only slightly in having a shorter gap between the two notes.

The song of *affinis* on the other hand, is a mellow raspy single note *woow*. Often two notes

are uttered (with a gap between them) as a couplet.

The sonograms show the close relationship of *obscura* with mainland *scutulata* and the distinctness of *affinis*.

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